DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 250 987 HE 017 839

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TITLE Personal Applications: A Humanistic Approach to the Undergraduate Psychology Curriculum.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (92nd, Toronto, Canada, August 24-28, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Curriculum; *Course Content; Curriculum Development; *Experiential Learning; Higher Education; Humanistic Education; *Nontraditional Education; *Psychology; *Undergraduate Study

ABSTRACT

The creation of a new undergraduate curriculum in psychology is discussed. It is suggested that the undergraduate psychology curriculum is valuable as an end in itself rather than solely as preparation for a career in the field. The new curriculum would be structured principally around a program of intensive study of the practical, personal applications of psychology. This restructured curriculum is proposed as an alternative to the traditionally academic one, rather than as its replacement. Textbooks are identified that might be used in the introductory psychology course and in courses that deal with developmental milestones, including: career planning and advancement, psychological aspects of marriage and family life, child rearing or parenting, educational psychology, interpersonal competence, and psychological growth and adjustment. The format of the course would be immersion, whereby the student learns to develop case materials from personal experiences, from shared classroom experiences, and from material appearing in the mass media. The curriculum might best be offered in a school of professional psychology. Possible implications for primary prevention are noted. (SW)

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Personal Applications: A Humanistic Approach to the Undergraduate Psychology Curriculum

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Presented at 92nd Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association at Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 1984.

HE 015 831

Most liberal arts curricula leading to the B.A. degree in psychology are still designed along traditional lines intended to acquaint students majoring in the field with the scientific and technical aspects of the discipline while paying relatively little attention to matters of practical application.

In a recent paper, Crider and his associates (Crider, Goethals, Kavanaugh, and Solomon, 1983) have argued that the current domination of the American system of higher education by the university (in contrast to the situation in the past when the "freestanding undergraduate college was the historical prototype for American higher education") has been largely responsible for the present overriding emphasis in undergraduate education on the preparation of the student primarily for further graduate study. This narrow focus, giving rise to "the myth that one can do nothing with a bachelor's degree in psychology, except seek additional education" (Matthews, 1983), seems to be working to the detriment of undergraduate departments of psychology during this era of fiscal restraint and tight budgeting. Many report experiencing difficulty in attracting and retaining students; and some express strong concern about making the B.A. degree in psychology more competitive and more "marketable" (A.P.A. Monitor, 1983). In addressing herself to this issue, Matthews (1983) has suggested a number of ways in which psychology departments can make their students more employable by providing them with specific skills that could be used in employment settings.

In this paper I view the problem from a radically different perspective, one that is designed to demonstrate the intrinsic value of an undergraduate concentration in psychology pursued

as an end in itself rather than solely as preparation for a career in the field. In order to achieve this shift in emphasis, I advocate the creation of a new undergraduate curriculum structured principally around a program of intensive study of the practical, personal applications of psychology. This curriculum is proposed as an alternative to the traditionally academic one rather than as its replacement and can be regarded as an attempt to implement an objective that has come into increasing favor within recent years.

In support of Miller's (1969) by now classic suggestion that psychology be turned over to the masses, there has emerged within the past decade or so a growing interest in the cultivation of methods and channels for the successful dissemination of the facts and principles of psychology so as to make them more readily available for public consumption and application. As a result of this concern, an impressively usable body of instructional material has been assembled and prepared in easily accessible form so that it has become feasible now for an educational institution to give serious consideration to designing a curriculum at the baccalaureate level which will offer its students the option of pursuing a program of practical training in the personal applications of psychology in everyday life. The advantage of such an innovation is that it serves to remove psychology from the esoteric ranks of the highly technical, abstract, and narrowly specialized preprofessional fields of study and to position it more attractively among those subjects that contain the intrinsic appeal that accrues to any body of knowledge possessing obvious immediate applicability and broad, general utility.

Students whose career objectives are not yet crystallized or who, for the present, entertain no higher ambitions than to develop into competent adults - i.e., effective parents, proficient employees, valued colleagues, cherished friends, and responsible citizens - should find an undergraduate concentration in the personal applications of psychology a stimulating and worthwhile focus for their academic efforts. Moreover, should the student belatedly settle on some related career objective requiring advanced study in the behavioral sciences, this kind of applied undergraduate training, although admittedly atypical, need not leave him or her unequipped to undertake such a program successfully.

Because a major aim of humanistic psychology is to disclose man to himself (Jourard, 1974) in order to expand self-knowledge and thereby enhance the freedom of the individual to choose effectively among an ever-widening array of personal options, an undergraduate curriculum centered on the personal applications of psychology must be recognized as a deliberate educational effort to contribute to this goal: hence the designation of this approach as a humanistic alternative to the traditional curriculum.

The New Curriculum

As in most curricula, the introductory survey course provides the necessary foundation for subsequent study. Rather than attempt to develop a detailed syllabus for such a course, I have chosen instead to identify some useful sources of material for inclusion in the basic orientation.

The following textbooks offer fairly comprehensive coverage of the conventional contents of general psychology combined with a consistent emphasis on personal applications in everyday life: Grasha (1983), Holland and Tarlow (1980), and Watson (1978).

More theory constrained and, therefore, narrower and more specialized in focus are Baldwin and Baldwin (1981), Miller (1975), Reese (1978), and Whaley and Malott (1971).

Because most beginning college students are not as familiar with the principles and procedures of effective study as the instructor might wish them to be, useful adjuncts to the basic introductory textbook include Locke (1975), Carman (1972), Pauk (1974), and Morgan and Deese (1969).

The developmental milestones, the tasks and challenges, commonly encountered by members of our culture as they move through the lifespan can serve as a convenient model on which to base our selection of the most appropriate additional courses to be offered to complete the new curriculum. Since most graduates hope to enter occupations after college, to marry, and to become parents, courses in applied vocational psychology, in the psychology of marriage and the family, and in effective parenting seem most germane.

Syllabi in career planning, selection, entry, and advancement can be compiled from materials available in the following sources: Kotter, Faux, and McArthur (1978), Moore (1976), Bolles (1983), Miles and Randolph (1979), Harvey and Brown (1982), Johnson (1978), Corsini, et al (1961), Kolb, et al (1971) and Du Brin (1974).

Psychological aspects of marriage and family life can be investigated, and concrete applications of principles of effective communication, successful relationship building, and conflict resolution can be derived from texts by Belkin and Goodman (1980), Schulz and Rodgers (1980), and Coleman (1984).

A course in successful childrearing or parenting (or a series of courses focusing on various aspects of parent-child relations according to the developmental needs of the child at different life-stages) can be designed from material contained in the following sources: Bigner (1979), Norton (1977), Dodson (1970), Chess, Thomas, and Birch (1965), White (1975), Braga and Braga (1974, 1975), and Lunde and Lunde (1980).

Although training in educational psychology is usually regarded as most relevant for students contemplating careers in education, with minor modification in emphasis, the content of such a course can be made equally valuable for the parent. Many textbooks stress applications and are, therefore, especially useful for the parent. Examples of such are: Charles (1976), Baird, et al (1972), Furth and Wachs (1975), Lehane (1976), Ringness (1975), Morasky (1973), Johnson and Johnson (1975), Walker and Shea (1976), Patterson and Gullion (1971), Egan (1979), Madsen and Madsen (1981), and Lahey and Johnson (1978).

Courses intended to help the student enhance his or her interpersonal competence through the acquisition or refinement of basic social skills are particularly apropos in a curriculum directed toward personal applications of psychology. Sources of useful material include: Williams and Long (1979), Watson and Tharp (1977), Johnson (1972), Egan (1973, 1977), Johnson and Johnson (1975), Gordon (1955), Knapp (1984), Becvar (1974), Daniels and Horowitz (1976), Miller, et al (1975), Luft (1969), and Ellis and Harper (1968).

Closely related to the preceding, but not identical, are courses

dealing with issues, problems, processes, and principles of psychological growth and adjustment. A comprehensive survey course or a series of courses concerned with aspects of this subject can be built around texts such as those by Calhoun and Acocella (1983), Newman and Newman (1981), Barocas, et al (1983), Coleman (1979), and Derlega and Janda (1981).

The highly pragmatic content of the humanistic undergraduate curriculum in psychology - here described in broad outline - lends itself particularly well to classroom presentation via the immersion approach (Brender, 1981), an instructional format that is correspondingly concrete and functional in its thrust.

The Immersion Format

The immersion process is intended to facilitate the training of the student to think psychologically. This is accomplished principally in class where he is taught systematically how to apply the terms, concepts, principles, and theories of general psychology to the analysis and explanation of incidents gathered from everyday life by himself, his classmates, or the instructor. At each class session he is exposed to repeated modeling of the process and to guided practice in its use.

In effect, this procedure is a variant of the case method form of instruction used with considerable success at the graduate level. In the immersion version, however, the student learns to develop his or her own case materials from personal experiences, from shared classroom experiences, and from material appearing in the mass media such as news items, gossip column anecdotes, and letters published in the personal advice and self-help columns.

The opportunity to introduce the immersion process by demonstrating the practice of "thinking psychologically" presents itself at the very first meeting of the class. Following his description of course format, attendance requirements, grading procedures and standards, and all other course-structuring comments, the instructor inaugurates the immersion process by inviting student reaction to the orientation. Using empathic listening and reflective responding, the instructor facilitates the progress of the ensuing interaction to a point at which it becomes feasible for him to interrupt the proceedings and point out to the class that he and they have just shared an experience that can be subjected to psychological scrutiny. Posing the question, "What is there of psychological interest in the interchange that just took place?", he helps to set the reflective tone of the course for the rest of the semester. Concluding the subsequent group analysis of the interaction, the instructor notes that the exercise just completed, which involved a recapitulation and psychological examination of a shared group experience, demonstrated an "instant replay" procedure that will be invoked periodically during the semester to help the class recapture and review its spontaneous activities as case material for psychological study. Then shifting focus to the anecdotal component of the immersion model, the instructor reads a sample excerpt from the popular press and invites the class to consider with him what there is of psychological interest for them in that item. Exploration of this material occupies the remainder of the hour.

Although prudence dictates that the instructor be prepared to

assume exclusive responsibility for the conduct of classroom activity during the first few weeks of the semester, student initiative is sought, encouraged, and rewarded from the outset. Usually this is accomplished simply by soliciting early voluntary participation. However, in the event that such effort fails or yields meager results, the reluctance of the students to become engaged in the instructional process is itself made the focus of psychological examination. This tactic is indicated also when participation is limited to an active few while the others remain passively on the sideline. The mere act of drawing attention to the problem of scant or sluggish participation in the learning experience and opening it to deliberation invariably serves to spark wider and more enthusiastic student involvement. After a while, the practice of "thinking psychologically" becomes automatic, an integral part of the ongoing pursuit of course mastery.

Suggested Setting for the New Curriculum

Although nothing intrinsic to the humanistic curriculum renders it unsuitable for inclusion as an accredited academic option within the conventional collegiate setting, the likelihood of such a nontraditional program gaining acceptance as a legitimate alternative to the standard undergraduate major in psychology in this kind of institution is remote for both economic and jurisdictional reasons.

Consequently, it seems the better part of wisdom to locate it elsewhere - under the aegis of some organization that has no prior vested interest in preserving and maintaining an educational program that is already firmly entrenched, sanctified by academic tradition, and economically vulnerable at present. The independent

school of professional psychology seems an especially appropriate setting for this type of educational innovation. As Korchin (1976, p. 607) notes, these institutions have been created "to free clinical psychology from the ideological and organizational constraints of [the] academic department... Such a setting...could take [the] aspirations of students more seriously and be able to provide more flexible practicum facilities..." This freedom to depart from tradition while imparting sound, practical education and training in applied psychology appears to equip such agencies ideally for such an unorthodox venture.

The New Curriculum as a Possible Agent of Primary Prevention

The concept of primary prevention, borrowed by the community mental health movement from the lexicon of public health, is defined by mental health workers as the prophylactic effort to avert the occurrence of psychologically disordered behavior among populations known or suspected to be at risk of such disturbance. Initially, preventive strategies were thought to be necessary only for limited segments of society, those populations whose members were, for genetic or environmental reasons, vulnerable to specific disorders: children who are beginning to show signs of emotional disturbance, children of mental patients, children who experience the death of a parent at an early age, children who are victims of abuse, or survivors of natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, or plane crashes. More recently, it has been recognized increasingly that most members of our society at some milestones or critical developmental periods of their lives encounter "normal emotional hazards" (Bowers, 1963; Heller and Monahan, 1977) that may impose upon some unmanageable stress. To deal with these

more commonplace and widespread conditions, two other prevention strategies have been developed in addition to the original high risk prevention program: general, community-wide programs of public information or education on matters of mental health, and milestone prevention programs targeted specifically at those individuals going through a period of developmental transition or crisis.

However, as they are conceived and implemented at present these preventive programs, intended in part to educate the layperson in the principles and practices of mental hygiene, are at best sporadic, limited in scope, piecemeal in production, and impromptu in design. As yet, no systematic attempt has been made to provide through existing channels of formal education - particularly those of higher education - anything resembling a comprehensive, graduated, integrated, and standardized program of personally relevant mental health instruction that might be readily available and broadly useful to normally functioning individuals interested in acquiring a solid fund of valid self-help information. The humanistic undergraduate sequence in the personal applications of psychology could be especially valuable for this purpose. Moreover, its possible efficacy as an agent for primary prevention could then be subjected to empirical evaluation.

Summary

To stem the recent decline in student enrollments reported by some undergraduate psychology departments, this paper proposes the creation of an alternative to the standard undergraduate psychology curriculum for students who do not plan a career in psychology. This new curriculum is intended to demonstrate the

intrinsic value of an undergraduate concentration in psychology by providing the student with an opportunity to undertake systematic study of the personal applications of psychology as they pertain to the affairs of everyday life.

It is also suggested that this curriculum, which is described in detail, be taught by the immersion method and be offered in schools of professional psychology.

Possible implications for primary prevention are noted.

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